

The Hill - 2009: The return of big government and its big failures

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2009: The return of big government and its big failures

By Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) - 12/16/09 08:03 PM ET

When 2009 goes down in the history books, it may well become known as the year the era of big government returned — and failed.

We began the year in the midst of a global economic and financial downturn that had left millions of Americans out of work even as individuals and small businesses struggled to get access to credit to get the economic gears moving again.

Democrats, having recently taken control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, had an opportunity to quickly prime the pump with targeted tax relief for individuals and small businesses. There was widespread agreement in Washington and around the country about the need for economic stimulus. A rapid response proposal to put money in the hands of hardworking families and job-creating American businesses would surely have garnered widespread bipartisan support. But that’s not the path Democrats chose.

Instead, the president and his congressional allies seized the opportunity to spend billions in borrowed money on favored government programs and initiatives. Just a fraction of the nearly trillion-dollar stimulus package went to traditional activities like road construction, while billions were devoted to significant policy changes — including a program designed to reshape our educational system — that had little or nothing to do with putting Americans back to work.

The Democrats’ government stimulus was quickly signed into law, and just as quickly it became clear that the legislation had failed by all objective measures. The administration pledged it would provide immediate relief, yet today only a fraction of the funds have escaped the federal bureaucracy and reached job creators on the ground. They pledged the unemployment rate would not exceed 8 percent, yet it stands today at 10 percent. And they pledged an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability for taxpayer dollars. Yet months after enactment of the legislation, government reporting revealed a troubling pattern of dubious job-creation claims and spending in fictional congressional districts. This has prompted me to call for an audit of every stimulus dollar spent. Hardworking taxpayers

deserve to know where their money is.

Democrats' plans for government expansion have not all come to fruition — yet. Several of their proposals remain stalled in one chamber or the other. Yet their economic consequences can already be felt.

Shortly after enactment of the bungled stimulus came a new national energy tax in the form of a cap-and-trade scheme that will make America less competitive.

At the same time, Democrats in the House and Senate were meeting behind closed doors to craft a healthcare overhaul that injects government bureaucrats and mandates into virtually every facet of our medical system.

Student loans were the next target for Democrat-controlled Washington. In September, Democrats in the House advanced a controversial proposal to crowd out the private sector from student lending in favor of a one-size-fits-all government-run alternative. Not content to wait for their proposal to become law, the administration and Democrats in Congress have taken in recent months to pressuring and cajoling colleges and universities into making the switch to the government program immediately.

Even the union card-check plan — a special interest giveaway that sacrifices workers' rights — includes a little-known provision to dramatically expand government control over the workplace. If an employer and newly formed union cannot reach agreement on complex work rules and other contract details, the process will be handed off to a panel of government bureaucrats for binding arbitration. In other words, both workers and employers lose their seats at the bargaining table, and a government functionary is given total control to set wages, benefits and workplace policies for two years.

Taken together, these proposals reveal a no-holds-barred approach to expanding the size and scope of government. For every problem, Democrats are quick to propose a government solution.

As 2009 comes to a close, it is clear this policy of putting government first has failed miserably. Between the job-stifling policies that have actually been enacted and those that loom over the horizon, America's job-creating small businesses are rightfully wary of what punitive scheme will emerge from Washington next. As a result, they're not

driving the economic recovery we so desperately need.

When the folks in Washington decide to increase their power by expanding government, there are consequences. The more money that is sucked out of the economy to grow the federal bureaucracy, the less money that is available for private sector job creation and economic expansion.

Just as you cannot un-ring a bell, we cannot erase the mark of bigger government that has marred 2009. But we can do better in 2010. Perhaps Washington's New Year's resolution could be a simple commitment to jobs before government.

Wilson is a member of the House Armed Services Committee; Education and Labor; and Foreign Affairs.